MENSTRUAL TABOOS

30p

MATRIARCHY
STUDY GROUP

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HECATE.

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RED IS FOR LIFE

An Enquiry into the Taboos Surrounding Woman's Cycle

"Spiritual, consecrated, wonderful, incomprehensible; said also of women at the menstrual period". This is an American Indian definition of tabu, itself a word derived fromt the Polynesian, and the basic form of the more common English spelling, taboo. And its original form? Robert Briffualt suggests it is closely allied to tupua, which means menstruation. Further, another Polynesian word, atus, also applied to menstruation, translated to mean God, and certainly refers to all spirits and supernatural phenomena.

Ishtar, the Moon Goddess of Bablyon was thought to be menstruating at the full moon. Then, the "sabuttu" was observed, the day of rest, simulating the day the moon takes when it is neither decreasing nor increasing. On the moon's sabattu it was considered unlucky to do anywork, eat cooked food or go on a journey. A full day of rest to coincide with the moon's rest, was obligatory. The sabuttu when the Goddess Ishtar was menstruating became the Sabbath of the Jews and Christians: the day when the Old Testament God rested from his labours, and put an obligation on everyone to do the same. So the Saturday of the Jews, the Sunday of the Christians, and the Friday of the Moslems, when shops are shut, and various extremly patriarchal religious observances take place, as they have done for several thousand years, are directly linked with what women today still call the "curse". This worldwide general attitude to menstruation is possibly the most fundamental example of women's put-down in patriarchal society, one which women themselves too often accept.

The blood-hidden....

If you travel abroad and pick up a language/phrase book for the countries you visit, you will be unlikely to find the words for buying a sanitary towel, or tampons, although you will probably need these more than the trapeze offered by a current German edition, or an elephant from a Spanish variety. You will be lucky to find accommodation and comfort in public lavatories for your condition, or be unlikely to be able to mention your needs publicly.

At home and at work, you are likely to feel pulled down. Doris Lessing describes it: "I hear my voice shrill and I stop myself. I realise my preiod has caught up with me; there's a moment in every month when it does, and then I get irritated because it makes me feel helpless and out of control.....", she talks about her "resentment against the wound inside my body which I didn't choose to have".

Many women can give examples of the frustration and unhappiness of menstrual days; there even seems to be a "scientific" explanation about premenstrual tension: it is a build up of fluid, perhaps pills will help.....

How far away are men today from the suggestions of Manu, the Hindu lawgiver who said: "The wisdom, the energy, the strength, the might, and the vitality of a man who approaches a woman who has menstrual excretions, utterly perish?" Eveyln Reed quotes a rhyme by Crawley (The Mystic Rose)- "Oh! Menstruating woman thou'rt a fiend
From whom all nature should be closely screened."

While how many women still refer to themselves as unclean during their period? "When a woman has a discharge of blood her impurity shall last for seven days; anyone who touches her shall be unclean till evening. Everything on which she lies or sits during her impurity shall be unclean. Anyone who touches her bed shall wash his clothes, bathe in water and remain unclean till evening. If he is on the bed where she is sitting, by touching it he shall be unclean till evening. If a man goes so far as to have sexual intercourse with her and any of her discharge goes on to him, then shall he be onclean for seven days, and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean." (Leviticus 15;19;24)

....and unclean

Whatever was sacred becomes tabu, whatever becomes tabu becomes set apart, after that becomes an object of revulsion and fear. Menstruation began as the very holiest of all mysteries - the origin of the word means deity, and the idea of the sacred, it is the link of women with the moon in her aspect of goddess throughout her 28 day cycle of waxing and waning, in fact the essence of the female vitality, spirit and major contribution to total understanding of , and unity with the universe. How did the changeover happen; what made this sacred subject into a curse - and still the major reason for the ban on women priests since they may be "unclean" when handling the Host and kindred objects? Above all, why is it that women themselves accept menstruation as a shame and even with revulsion, allow themselves to feel degraded and dejected, feel unclean, and try to behave as if there's nothing really the matter?

Is there in fact some other way to regard it?

The reasons why

This is a far ranging and difficult subject. My object is to try and condense viewpoints provided by researchers into women's cultural history, and to suggest that there is indeed a way in which women may not only come to terms with their biological cycle, gaining comfort and inspiration from it but also, strength for the political struggle.

We have first to look at the past and primitive peoples. There is abundant evidence that the moon was worshipped as a feminine deity and the Moon Goddess was chief af all other goddesses and gods. In addition, as Esther Harding puts it, the moon was the visible representative of womanhood.

"To the ancients the moon stood as a symbol of the very essence of woman in its contrast to the essence of man". The Moon Goddess was seen in her three aspects, waxing, full and waning, with the later added mystery of the time when she is on the "dark side" and cannot be seen. The Triple Goddess is available to us in all sorts of symbols, records and illustrations. She was the source of growth, fertility, and change; and in her waning and dark side, she represented the mystical power of death and rebirth. Her twenty eight days cycle was observed as the same cycle as that of women's menses; menstruation was thought to be linked to the moon, and in many languages the words for both are the same. Thus women were thought to be connected with the great and mysterious power of the moon, which in its turn gave them children; (as well as being responsible for the growth of crops. Today, lost lore on the planting of herbs and vegetables at the right aspect of the moon's cycle, is being recovered).

CERES. FROM A TERRACOTTA RELIEF FROM GREECE.

Greek thought

There was a further development of the association of the menses and fertility which lasted rightdown to the time of Aristotle. Living in the fourth century B.C. he suggested that the foetus was entirely formed out of the menstrual blood contained in the uterus. The Male's contribution was an "impulse to movement"; Pliny, nearly 300 years later, suggested that the menstrual blood in the womb: "is the material substance for generation, and the man's seed serveth instead of rennet to gather it round into a curd, which afterwards in the process of time quickeneth and groweth to the form of a body". Briffault comments that the Aristotelian view remained the t eaching of medical schools until less than two hundred years ago. It was displaced by the concept, also expressed in the Greek myths, that the woman's body merely provided a vessel for the child which was in fact entirely created by semen.

In the 'Eumenides', Apollo gives judgement for Orestes who has killed his mother Clytemnestra. This was to avenge her murder of Agamemnon his father. In turn, Clytemnestra's murder had been to avenge her daughter's

sacrifice to the Gods in order that Agamemnon might have a fair passage across the sea to the Trojan wars.

Matricide was a heinous crime and Orestes is hunted by the Furies - the Eumenides, female nemesis - after his deed. But it becomes clear that Orestes is not to be hunted for ever:

Orestes: "And are my mother's blood and my blood one?"
Fury (on behalf of the mother Clytemnestra)
"How did she feed the else beneath her zone.
Caitiff! Thy mother's blood wilt thou deny?"
Apollo: ".....mark and understand:
The mother to a child that men call hers
Is no true life begetter, but a nurse
Of seed. Tis the ~~owner~~ power of the seed
Alone begetteth. Woman comes at need
A stranger, to hold safe in love and trust
that bud of new life".
Because of this ruling, Orestes goes free.

This view of women's passive role in child bearing was a major cultural source of patriarchal domination until the early twentieth century. The Greek plays written at the time of the takeover of women led societies by male power explicitly record the put-down of women and the reasons for it.

It was this degradation that so eagerly seized the tabu power of menstruation and turned it into something fearful, revolting, dangerous. Until then the tabu had worked in a different manner.

Segregation

During the time of their menses women almost universally lived apart form men; they went into special women's huts, and often stayed alone for several days. A woman did not work and took no part in the activities of the community at this time. She was considered to be in the condition of association with the moon, and took on the moon's terrifying and mysterious power. Girls at their first menstruation went through female "rites de passage:" they worked through iniatory disciplaines in order to get into touch with the Goddess, with their own natures and to become adult women. Esther Harding says that the voice of nature speaks to her in her own person. Mirces Eliade in "Myths Dreams and Mysteries" speaks of women's mysteries connected with the first menstruation, which revolve upon the theme of "access to the sacred". This is a profound religious experience and sets the tone of her life for later mystery of childbirth and suckling.

It is no mistake that these very processes have been held by the later patriarchal religions to be inclean and impure: no woman who has carried a child for nine months, gone through the ordeal of birth and then held it in her arms triumphant needs to be told of the degradation of having to be "churched" to get rid of her impurity before she can join a Christian (or in equivalent terms a Jewish or Moslem) congregation.

The power of blood

The mysterious power of menstrual blood has been acknowledged in primitive societies throughout the world; first it made the crops grow, and women would ritually walk through fields for this purpose. Later, when it was held to be malefficient, women still walked through the fields for their flow to kill pests. Among the American Indians, Briffault records, a woman would leave her isolation hut during the night, at the time the corn began to ripen, and walk naked through the fields. By this means caterpillars and injurious insects would be destroyed. The Greeks had a similar procedure and Democritus stated that all insects and worms are destroyed in a field if a menstruating woman walks three times round it with flowing hair and bare feet. In Italy at the time Briffault was writing - the first quarter of the twentieth century - he found Italian peasants in the district of Belluno carrying out the same rituals. Caterpillars would be destroyed if a young girl ran naked roung the field. Says Briffault: "It is usual for a priest to assist in exorcising them (the caterpillars) but it is not essential". In Holland there is still a custom for a menstruating girl to go round the cabbage patch to get rid of the caterpillars.

That woman has enormous power, is reflected in her menses, is recorded in every so-called civilisation and savagery throughout the world. The Talmud, ancient store of Jewish wisdom, states that if a woman at the beginning of her period passes between two men, she kill one of them. The Lebanese believe that the woman's shadow causes flowers to wither; a menstruating woman, they say, will kill the horse she rides. Pliny's "Natural History" states that the touch of a menstruous woman turns wine to vinegar, blights crops, kills seedlings, blasts gardens, rusts iron (especially at the waning of the moon) kills bees and causes mares to miscarry. Frazer records that in Brunswick, Germany, there is a custom that if a menstruating woman assists at the killing of a pig the pork will putrify.

There are many other instances, and no doubt each woman will know for herself what fears and taboos are current in her own personal culture.

Superstitions

The sacred character of the tabu which allied the woman's power to the mysterious power of the moon and the goddess gradually became eroded. What was left was the terror of the unknown, and male assumption of brutality and cruelty in order to become "superior" to it. The mark of the menstruating woman is of course the flow of blood; and it is this blood which attained enormous significance. Tabu people were marked in blood. Later, any red material was used, Red cohre. paint. vegetable dyes. Blood and its colour red had the significance of the vital principle of the soul, or of something holy. Everyone knows of blood brother ceremonies among men. Somebody or something coloured red is set apart as something special. At the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompei, the paintings of the Elsusinian rites are all on a background of blood red. Many primitive people believe that blood is the substance of the human spirit. Menstru-

ating women could indicate their apartness by marking themselves with blood or red paint.

The blood sign is used in Indian marriage ceremonies. It makes the woman tabu to everyone except the husband. She is marked with blood or red paint, to make her "pure to her husband, impure(tabu)to everyone stranger" Indian women still wear the "sindur" blood spot on their foreheads showing their tabu state. Red paint and blood have been used in China until the revolution to mark a bride and set her apart. The Caribs who, according to Briffault, "be-spoke their bride before she was born" took possesion by marking the mother's abdomen with a red cross. There are countless examples of blood tabus. But some are closer to home.

Who has not at some time avoided stepping under a ladder, for fear ot bad luck? This superstition links with an older on of not walking under a leaning tree or even the rails of a fence. Why not? Because a menstruating woman may have been there first, may have leant on the tree or the fence, there may be some essence or drop of her blood there- and it is unlucky! Among all the customs relating to fear of women's blood, nearest to our own time are those of Jewish men who are careful to dispose of hair of nail clippings away from the sight of women; if a menstruating woman should step over them, the evil influence would feed back on to their owners. Orthodox Jews will not shake hands with women lest they be contaminated.

But banish menstrual blood as we may, there are certain links with the past that we carry with us. What about red painted finger nails? Women may hide their menses but seem to need the remainder of their female power in this way: there is some sociological evidence to link the two. How many women drive, opt for red cars? The AA state the numbers are significantly more than chance. What about the use throughout the world of henna, for hair reddening, and of the ultra reddening of lips and cheeks?

The Menopause

As women grow older and reach the menopause, there is some evidence that they choose more home furnishings in shades of red - to remind them of their youth? Our menstrual blood and the cycle which produces it is part of our adult lives for perhaps forty years. Who knows if the depressions that often overtake menopausal women are not for the loss of that cycle and that sight? We all are aware of the ups and downs of the cycle: the time of the month when we are ready to go out and face the world, do new things, go to different places, overtake our previos limits; and then the time when we would rather stay quietly by ourselves, do not wish to drive, or argue; or win; we would rather think our thoughts peacefully.

What woman has not experienced the tension, not always a bad one, that flows away with a period; sometimes we dream before the onset, mixed and difficult dreams; and then with the flow, the answer to our problem arrives.

Male definitions of menstruation

But so many women too, are ashamed of their period, see it with disgust. I think they are mirroring male attitudes. Doris Lessing talks about distaste, her dislike of bad smells, the necessity for constant washing. She says: "I like the smell of sex, of sweat of skin or hair. But the faintly dubious, essentially stale smell of menstrual blood, I hate. And resent. It is a smell that feels strange, even to me, an imposition from the outside - a bad smell, emanating from me".

Here she describes an essence of women's internalising of male oppression. "A bad smell - emanating from me". This is far from the holy and sacred name of a god, or goddess, and the female powers of intuion and communion with nature.

When I wrote my own life story I recalled an incident about my early menstruation. I had described my unhappiness at losing my own parents, and was living with a stepmother with whom I could not communicate. I wrote:

> "Another thing that happened while we lived in that road was that my step-mother was kind to me about my periods. I had to use the washable kind like baby's towelling, and they used to chafe badly. One day I came back from school and she asked me what was the matter and I told her. She got a basin of warm water and told me to wash, and gave me some talcum powder, which I had never used before, and gave me a clean diaper. The relief was wonderful and I remember thinking that perhaps she was as kind as my real mother and not a horrible person at all".

ASSYRIAN WINGED MOON.

SACRED MOON TREE.

One reason given by a publisher for not taking the book was that it was "sordid" and dealt with "things like menstruation", which he said "people wouldn't want to read about". Another time, writing an article about "camping from a woman's point of view" the editor who had commissioned it refused to publish saying he didn't want all that dirty stuff. I had written

about the lack of facilities of sanitary towel disposal and for changing in comfort on camp sites then.

We have acquiesced in a male world that does not want to know about menstruation. Ourselves, we try and push it into the background, "lead normal lives" (i.e. male lives). Esther Harding had different advice to offer.

Recalling the enforced solitude that women endured in primitive times, she believes that they gained closer contact with the primitive forces within them. She says: "The modern woman has lost touch with this value and it is possible that her menstrual disabilities may be related to this loss.... the woman has an opportunity at the dark of the moon to get into touch with a deeper and more fundamental layer of her own psychic life". E. Harding believes that emotional or physical disturbance at that time indicate a conflict between her own nature and her conscious attitude. "An inner necessity is calling her to introvert, to withdraw pyschologically from the demands of her external life, and live for a little while within the secret places of her own heart."
She adds: "To withdraw in this way produces a strangely healing effect". It will be objected that in modern life, we cannot withdraw. If we are "doing a job" - for pay, we have to behave "as usual"; if we are at home especially with young children, demands are made and no quarter given. Women oriented to the political left may object that emphasizing menstrual apartness is a regression from equal values with men; what of the picture of "in the forefront together" if menstrual women are lagging behind communing in the home? The whole picture of women making a fuss about their menses runs counter to most current political thought.

Women defining menstruation

But could we think again? Is not this attitude a true working of Patriarchy? Women do live on a monthly cycle: instead of burying it, why not make something of it?

Jesus remarked that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. He was wrong. The Sabbath was made by and for women. There is ample precedent from the past for women's days, where men and children would wait on and bring food to women who were living apart from them - perhaps just in another room, or even a part of the room. To bring home, nowadays, to men that women are in a special condition, are communing with themselves, are at the "dark side of the moon" and may gain inspiration to sort out problems and deal better with every-day life- is not this a break in their patriarchal conditioning? And could not children be taught from the very earliest moment that on "Mother's Days" every month, she has to be treated in an extra special way, and demands not made on her all the time?

And at one's place of work, instead of fractious conflict with one's feelings, could we not wear something red, and work quietly and peacefully, and expect fewer damands. Remembering all the time, that the new moon rises after the old has slipped away; other people could start getting used

to our cycles and benefitting from them. We could break the ties of the man's world. Using our menstrual cycle we could start showing what a woman's world is like.

I believe that women regaining confidence through the explicit demonstration of their cycle and its powers in life could move from many conflicts within themselves into a female - defined world. This would create a marvellous crack in the armour of patriarchy, and might help us all to break through to a world where being female will be a delight and a powerful lever of change.

Pauline Long.

Religious Blood

Far from being denied the right to create, every woman is sold creativity almost from birth.... with some provisions: it mustn't be serious, it must refer back to her role of housewife/mother, it must be cheap and bear interruption.

Expression is power, self-knowledge, and the need to express is basic to human nature. It's an instinct more basic than that of magic and religion. Magic and religion took it out of the hands of the people and reserved it for a priesthood, recognising its power.

Christianity is full of male jealousy of female importance. The whole Christian myth takes the violence and energy out of the female experience, leaving women only an insipid view of themselves. The energy thus robbed from women is imposed artificially on the male.

No-one can go through the process of birth with a woman, love and sympathy can support her, but nothing can lessen her essential isolation. Christianity co-opts this experience, as a useful tool in its power games. For while maternal suffering is unconditional, since it has always been seen as inevitable, the suffering of Christ is blackmail, a wretched appeasement to a cold and cruel god..... Mary is mother, wife and child to the same male power figure, utterly abject, meek and passive..... It is no accident that Mary is portrayed as giving birth in tranquility or ecstasy, as a reward for her asexuality, while her son takes on the suffering and dramatic role of the mother. The figure displayed on the crucifix is a male parody of the female experience, of menstrual bleeding and childbirth. While women are forced to hide the signs of their bleeding and suffering as a shameful thing, the deified male flaunts his on all sides.

Jo Nesbitt.

Some Thoughts on Menstruation

Many strange and complex connections come to my mind when I think of what menstrual blood - to menstruate - actually would have signified symbolically and magically in Ancient society where the cosmic Goddess was conceived of as the Moon-Mother who bleeds monthly. "Menses" mean Moon-changes. "Menses" come from the same word-root as the words for Mind/Month. Becoming is the Lunar order of things. It was believed that as the food/grain in the Earth germinates thanks to the power of growth and fertility bestowed upon it by the Moon-Mother so also the animal and human life grew and was fed from Her menstrual blood. The New Moon was seen to cause seeds to germinate and quite likely the entire community of women menstruated at this time of the Lunar's phases.

Symbolic connections were perceived between Her blood, Her breast milk, and rain-water, underground waters... in fact moisture of any form was given by Her and originated in Her who lives beyond the celestial waters. The entire Cosmos was magically perceived of as a gigantic woman and birth, pregnancy and menstruation were seen as particularly sacred, powerful and magic states of Being.

CEREMONY IN HONOUR OF CERES. FROM A FRESCO FROM POMPEII.

Menstrual blood was THE sacred life-substance and the womb-like temples and dwellings were daubed in red ochre, the colour of blood, as were also the bodies of the Dead awaiting rebirth within the Earth-womb of the Great Mother. The earliest sacred precincts of ancient times were those within which the women gave birth and the priestesses of the Mother were also healers and midwives. The cave of psychic rebirth, in which the Shaman/esses retreated to go on their psychic "journeys", and to receive oracular dreams, was the cosmic womb of the Goddess.

The Goddess was the bisexual Serpent/Dragon. On Malta the Goddess in Her most ancient embodiment was part snake and Her name was Delphyne. Delphys is an ancient word for womb. At Delphi, the oracular shrine of

Gaia - the Earth Mother, Her snake/python was housed in an underground shrine called "The Navel of the Earth". The snake is similar in appearence to the umbilical cord and everywhere the snake/dragon is associated with birth-giving powers. It is also everywhere associated with psychic and oracular powers. In Africa, snakes protuding from the forehead, signified oracular powers and European Witches were burnt for having a "Pythonical" spirit (psychic powers).

Rhythms

The life giving powers in women were associated, in other words, with heightened magic powers and inspired states of being. It has recently been suggested that artificial light (electricity) of the cities has affected our body rhythms and has destroyed our ancient woman understanding of menstrual month/Moon periodicity. That the human species evolved a genetic response to the Moon (Light is a most powerful trigger of biological rhythms) nearly all women ovulating at the Full Moon and menstruating at the New Moon, is a distinct possibility. Recent studies have shown that it is the light of the Moon that connects the Moon and reproductive behaviour in organisms. The human being, like all animals, evolved in a consistently dark and light world, night and say always alternating. That the ancient women had knowledge of natural contraception (Lunarception) to do with observing the Moon's cycles was probable, as well as having knowledge of herbal sterilizing draughts.

Esther Harding ("Woman's Mysteries, Ancient and Modern") says that we women in the patriarchal culture, are cut off from the springs of life in the depths of our own beings. This is particularly true concerning how we now experience our menstrual periods, commonly described as the "curse".

I think that in ancient omen cultures the women experienced themselves as particularly sacred, powerful and psychically open at the time of their collective menstruation. It has, by the way, been proved also that women who live together, now, in collectives (Lesbian or otherwise) tend to start to menstruate around the same time in the month.

Menstruation and Energy

My own personal experience of my own body-rhythms (and I was more able to observe them when not sleeping regularly with anybody during a period of a few years) is that at the time of my menstruation I felt my body as humming with almost electrical impulses, of heightened sense and awareness. I feel and sense everything more intensely and if I am then involved increative work (I am an artist) I work obsessively and think deeply. If on the other hand I already feel bored, tense, pissed off then this potentially inspired time turns into anger, irritation, obsessive violence and quarrels, bad body feelings etc..

So my experience is of a heightened psychic energy which can express itself in intense sexual experiences (generally disapproved of in this society as sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman is seen as "dirty"). In sexual Tantric religion a menstruating woman is seen as most potent, being

in touch with her "Red energy", in withdrawal and meditation (practised by ancient women), or heightened pain, (much pain to do with Menstruation I am sure is simply psychosomatic) anger and frustration.

We now live in a society which entirely denies the lunar rhythms of being in both men and women.

Because of our oppression as women in patriarchal society many young girls associate getting their first periods with becoming physically the despised

and powerless Mothers of Patriarchy. Many women's "neurosis" start with this realisation. As long as we live in a society where our sexuality has so many fearful associations for us (unwanted children, rape, sexual abuse by men etc:, men using their sexuality to gain economic and other powers over women, horrific abortions and equally horrific hospital childbirths etc:), we are going to keep on fearing our menstruations and not be able to get in tune with the psychic energies relieased during that time - the time of the New Moon.

Monica Sjoo

A Bleeding Shame

The wonderful Mother Earth, the giver of life to this rotten universe of ours, the woman who nurses us through all ills mental and physical is a leper, untouchable, unclean and for centuries ignorant of her major physical function and the reasons why.

Today, with the advent of sex education and dear Mary Whitehouse walking about with blinkers on, we at least are now aware that once a month for damned good reason we bleed not from the heart, but from the core of our being, from where the seed of life itself is shedding and waiting. When asked to write this article, I did not realise how we all suffered from basic ignorance of a disease called the curse and how this ignorance was analysed. Almost everyone I spoke to about this matter shrugged their shoulders and said "It just happened one day".

Were you warned about it? Told the reason why? - Oh gawd no, it was like .... like something dirty.

When men were asked, they were most disgusted that this menstruation could literally be so bloody at times.

Yet it is strange with all that has been said, a few stories of lurid interest came to light.

To begin with most of us know that during these few days a woman's desire for love-making and orgasm increases and part of the reason for the female frustration and anger against the world itself is because of her natural right and the unnatural denial of it. Now why unnatural? Men generally speaking have been brought up to enjoy a woman's organ under 'dry' circumstances so that the actual hold of the muscles is far more satisfying and greater for him. Women, on the other hand, as much as they may desire to make love tend to suffer what is commonly known as "aches and pains" in the head or elsewhere. Here is a strange little story:

As unclean as we are during menstruation, when a virgin, we start this so called period of life as creatures who are worshipped and cherished in certain countries.

One strange story was related to me by a foreign lady: that during this period young girls (virgins) were sold, not for sexual intercourse, but for curing impotence. The young girl was almost sucked dry by the male of her menstruation and this sick practice was considered to be the cure. It was regarded as if the juice of the pomegranate was pumped into the veins of the man and it was not regarded as wrong as he was regenerating life and purifying himself.

I strongly believe that we as mothers ought to educate our children both male and female to understand not only the full meaning of this process of maturity but its implications - days of depression prior to having a period, the suicidal behaviour that besets some women to such a degree that driving is considered a hazard, and above all, as women, to make a study of ourselves. We are important and must develop our mental capacities in all forms to allow new windows to be opened and rays of hope and understanding to penetrate and overcome taboos handed down from our forefathers.

In Moslem law, slapping the girl child's cheeks as she terrified and bewildered tells her mother of her so-called predicament has a purpose of making her aware of her shame and bring roses to her cheeks for the rest of her life.

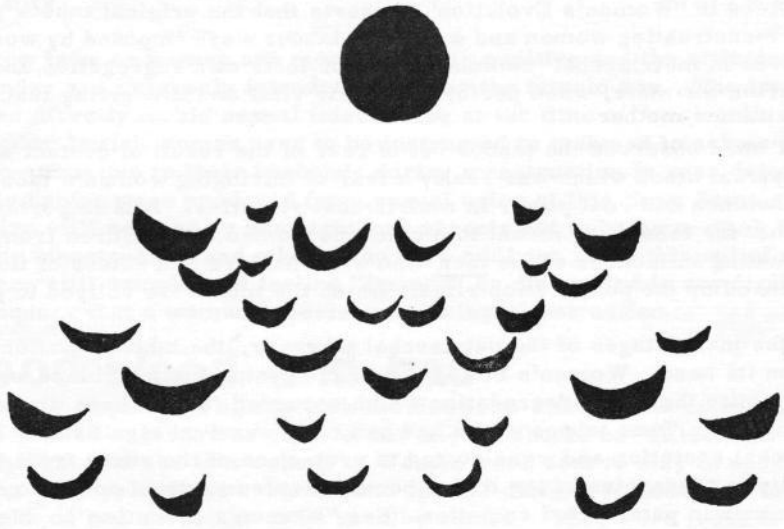
Let us give her a kiss on both cheeks and make her understand that she is now budding into a rose. Let us too remove as many of those thorns growing round the stem of her being as possible by making her growth less painful, her life more natural and by removing many complexes and psychological hang-ups from our lives in general.

Marie Lecko.

Menstruation

I can feel a tightening of my loins
When the end of the month comes round again.
A wave of timliness breaks over me
and the tide flows, harvested once more.
The knowledge of the dropping fruit plumbs through me,
Rich thick patches of life's viscous patterns
mark these few lixurient days:
I can only compare this embem of mine
to triumphal crimson, blackened by shadow,
dappled like a stream of water in the setting sun;
But I feel sagging sick and weary
And I wish to cradle the empty cave, my womb,
Say, rocking, "don't taste sour endings in this pain."
This dark warm bed that has small urges to pulse while waiting,
"Don't be misled by the roar of the ebbing tide."
In silent reaches more soundless than a pendulum
and poised as an intaken breath,
lies a tiny knowing thing.
Encouraged by small movements she falls,
Causing small implosions of hesitant plasma
and raising small scarlet fires of excitement
in gathering certainty: purpose gaining form
momentum, to a heavy ripeness in encircled protection.
Again I can feel a tightening of my loins
When the end of the month comes round.

Mary Coghill.



Menstrual Taboos and their Relationship to Female Sexual Repression

Negative conditioning

When I recently asked a female friend who teaches in a London Comprehensive School for Girls for her views on menstrual taboos, she replied that she didn't think such things existed now .... people just didn't talk about menstruation ... it was all a question of modesty.

It seems to me that negative attitudes towards female biology are remarkably constant in all patriarchal societies, although the form they take may vary. This stress on modesty may be viewed as the present cultures attempt to ensure that girls continue to have negat ive attitudes about their bodies and about menstruation in particular. Modesty is in fact a form of of taboo

Historical background

Through the dark ages of Hebrew, Moslem and Christian patriarchal societies, female sexuality and eroticism in particular have been tainted with the blood of women. Around the menstruating woman the misogynist has woven myths of fear and loathing, magic and superstition, uncleanliness and disgust, which have all contributed to present day notions of menstruation.

Evelyn Reed in "Woman's Evolution", asserts that the original taboos regarding menstruating women and women in labour were imposed by women themselves in matriarchal communities, for their own segregation and protection from the male, when performing their vital and life-giving functions.

"Savage" men observed the taboos out of rear of the result of contact with the menstrual blood which was really a fear of infringing women's taboos., because women had real power in matriarchal societies. It is important to stress that the taboo was meant to ptotect the women and children from the contaminating influences of the men who were hunters and eaters of flesh, as evidensed by the purification rituals which the men were obliged to perform.

During the many stages of the patriarchal takeover, the taboo situation was turned on its head. Women's biology and her "contaminating" blood were used to justify their own degredation which occurred for the first time in social history. Thus taboos which had had early survival significance in matriarchal societies and were rooted in protection of the young from the cannibalistic tendencies of the male, became instruments of power to suppress women in patriarchal societies. (See "Women's Evolution"). Men

began to desire knowledge of paternity to ensure the continuity of their line. To esnure this it was necessary to colonise women and to restrict and undermine their sexuality.

Amongst Semitic peoples, taboos against coitus at menstruation were universal and it is the Hebrew attitudes which are largely responsible for the European Christian attitudes of uncleanliness and the prohibition of coitus during a woman's period. But taboos are not restricted to cultures with a Hebrew-Christian history. In most "primitive" societies which are in varying stages of transition to patriarchal organisation, the menstruating woman is regarded as taboo and coital contact is forbidden because of the harm it would do to men. The aborigines of Australia and New Guinea belive that the menses are caused by intercourse with an evil spirit or spirit animal. The Bolivian Toba Indians believe the spirits are angry with a menstruating woman. The Suk warriers of the Sudan cannot eat anything touched by a menstruating woman for fear losing their virility.

Punitive attitudes

At various stages of patriarchal history menstruating women have been avoided, segregated, isolated, whipped, blamed. In response to such misogynist propaganda, some Indian women are kept in Purdah at this time to safeguard the community from contamination. Other communities subject girls at puberty to a period of isolation varying from the Hindu four days to eight months amongst the Indians of Vancouver Island and seven years in Borneo. At the end of the seclusion period, purification rituals are always deemed necessary.

When these practices are viewed against the background of the punitive practice of clitoral circumcision which is still carried out on millions of women throughout the Moslem world at puberty, we get an idea of how repressive patriarchal society has been to female biology, to female sexuality.

Hebrew laws on women are most definitely punitive and the attitudes they engender are expressly intended to debase the female sex. The laws of Moses directly forbid sexual intercourse at the time of "uncleanliness". Orthodox Jewish women used to be instructed to make themselves plain and unattractive to their husbands during menstruation in case deformed or sickly babies were produced from sexual union at this time. Some girls today are still advised by unenlightened parents not to bathe or wash theirhair during menstruation and others who have not been given this out of date advice, still complain of feeling "frumpy" or discounted in any feelings of inadequacy that a woman experiences during menstruation.

Good blood and bad

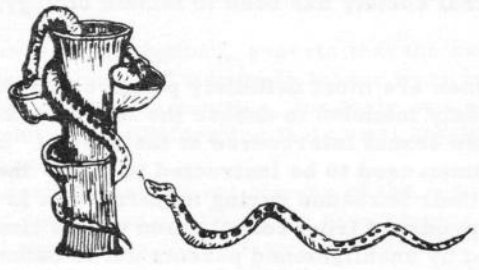
The early Christian Fathers took the Hewbrew attitudes to extremes. Women were regarded as unclean and anyone should be "filled with shame at the thought that she is a woman". Women were sent to stay in special places during their periods or restricted to special diets or forbidden to touch food, utensils or bed coverings to be used by others. They were found to be in

need of "Churching" or purification after childbirth and even marriage the bedrock of Hebrew law became debased and seen as a bitter necessity. "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband..... I would that all men were even as myself..... But if they cannot contain, let them marry, for it is better to marry than to burn." (St. Paul in his Epistle to the Corinthians.) Christian societies tried to eradicate all vestiges of woman power over female biology - in contraception, abortion and midwifery - that is what the witch hunts were really about. The witch, the precurser of the goddess, lost under patriarchy her powerful position in matriarchal society as procreator and producer of crops. Even today witches are seen as "tainted" by association with blood rites.

Yet in spite of the powerful blood taboos against women, Christianity teaches that both men and women can only be saved from everlasting damnation through the blood of Christ. He alone is given the power to save humans from their original sin - i. e. the sin of association with Eve's contaminating sexuality. Through the Holy Communion we are put in touch with God by eating the bread - Christ's body, and drinking the wine - Christ's blood.

"When I was in convent school, I was afraid to chew the communion wafer, because I thought my mouth would be full of the blood of Jesus. I believe the Holy Sisters planted this idea in my mind." (Irish Catholic teacher, aged 28 years.)

This is only one example of the use of a ritual - the blood ritual - in patriarchal religion, which has been borrowed from goddess religions and used to debase women at the same time. It is now not female blood which is precious and procreative, but male blood and particularly the blood of the all-powerful male.



CLAY SNAKE VESSEL FROM CRETE.

Girls and the Menarche

When viewed against this negative historical background, we should not be surprised that the contemporary woman retains some negative attitudes about her menstrual biology. It is now accepted that emotions and attitudes can affect the menstrual cycle which is controlled by the pituitary gland which in turn is regulated by the higher brain centre, the hypothalmus, which is responsive to our mental and emotional state. Menstruation has been known to cease altogether or conversely to flood, in times of great physical or emotional stress. The "menstrual clocks" of women sleeping in dorm-

itories have been found to synchronise over a period of time - known as symbiosis. Unpleasant or adverse social circumstances can affect either the menstrual flow or increase the premenstrual syndrome, (see Katharina Dalton's "The Menstrual Cycle"). In the light of this evidence we have to be open to consideration that negative social attitudes and ideas about menstruation affect the general well being and health of the individual female in a patriarchal society.

Adolescent girls still refer to menstruation as "the curse". Others have a more "modest" attitude and are loathe to mention a subject so vital to their lives. Others are either totally misinformed or have doubts about the significance of menstruation for their own bodies.

"My teacher told us that periods were to do with eggs and babies. That's all I remember now, but I curse the eggs and babies when I have backache each month. No my mother did not tell me anything. When my periods started she said I'd know what it was like to be a woman now and threw a pack of sanitary towels at me. Ever since then my mother and I have been bad friends." (15 year-old girl, South Coast town). "We don't like to buy Tampax ourselves in case someone sees us - they might think we are tramps or slags or something. You know how people think - neighbours and all that. I ask my Mum to get them for me. I'd never tell my boyfriend that I used Tampax. You know what he'd think don't you. I hope he'll never guess that I've got a period." (Conversation with a girl aged 14 in a group discussion at a Comprehensive School. Most of the girls agreed with her sentiments and some of them felt that a girl should not use Tampax until she was married. That made all the difference.)

It seems that the mystique of chastity is still with us. The modern male may not exactly demand display of blood-stained sheets in the streets, but he still in general seems to need evidence that the girl he marries is not "shop-soiled" and the use of Tampax seems to be taken as evidence to the contrary. (Read Michael Schofiel on "The Sexual Behaviour of Young People").

Embarrassment

The sense of secrecy over buying Tampax and Sanitary towels seems widespread amongst schoolgirls - another example of false modesty. It seems common for mothers or older sisters to buy them. I have also heard schoolgirls comment that this is the only way that they can afford to get this expensive necessity - buy conning someone older into buying them for them.

The necessity to keep menstruation a secret from boyfriends, fathers and brothers is also commonly expressed by schoolgirls.

"I'd rather die than let my boyfriend see I was having a period. One day my girlfriend went up to the front of the class in school and her dress was badly soiled with blood. The whole class started to titter and I was ashamed for her, with all the boys there. The teacher sent her to the restroom but my friend was so shamefaced she didn't come back to school for three months

and when she did, she had lost a stone or more in weight and I think she had been starving herself.

Now I've left school and my Mum says I have to take layers and layers of protection to work with me other-wise I'd be ashamed if something like that happened in the office. (16 Year-old girl who has just left school).

"I was a well-developed girl at nine, so my mother was advised by her female family doctor to tell me about menstruation. I was delighted by this exciting news and proceeded to enlighten my classmates. Their mothers were not so enlightened however and told them that my information was wrong and they ganged up against my mother for telling me so early.

I didn't believe much that my mother said for a long time after that and she didn't dare divulge anything "sexual" again.

When my periods appeared at eleven years of age I couldn't accept that this was the reality, which I had repressed from the age of nine. I started to slide into that condition they now call "anorexia" and lost two stone in weight. Needless to say the menses disappeared for a year or so and didn't reoccur until I was thirteen." (40 year-old woman writer.)

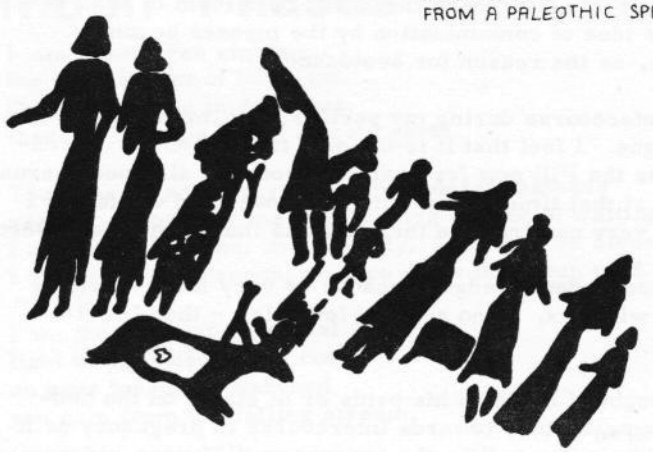
Illness

It is no coincidence that anorexia nervosa or "self-induced" starvation regularly appears in young puberty aged girls and more rarely in puberty aged boys. To a large extent this is due to the negative social forces which still surround what should be one of the most inportant single events in a woman's life - the onset of menstruation. At the same time there is a sudden increase in the reproductive hormones and an increase in the sex drive. It is significant that many studies show that 99% of boys are masterbating to orgasm in early adolescence and under 50% of girls are - figures for girls are often as low as 20 or 30%. If the figures are underestimates of the real situation, this in itself shows that girls are less able than boys to discuss their own sexual needs and responses and will consequently be more guilt-ridden about the practices. The suppression of female eroticism at puberty is a crucial step in the creation of obedient wives and passive mothers to serve the patriarchy.

Alternatives?

It is noticeable that whilst the patriarchal Jewish tribes celebrate a boy's coming of manhood publically, there is no equivalent ceremony for the girl whose development is even more obvious. The "patriarchal takeover" ensured that no such festivals survived to celebrate a woman's "coming of age". Matriarchal societies held feasts and ceremonies to celebrate a girl's first menstruation. There are accounts of menstrual blood being scattered on the fields in fertility rites to ensure that the crops prospered, all of which would give the menstrual flow the status and importance which is negated in our own society.

DANCE GROUP
FROM A PALEOTHIC SPANISH ROCK PAINTING.



In matriarchal society also knowledge of paternity is unimportant, therefore no repressive forces are used to curb female, or for that matter male eroticism? There are many accounts in literature of puberty rites which are described as orgiastic feasts. These would undoubtably have been used to allow the free expression of female eroticism.

Problems

Of course it is not only the lives of girls at puberty which are affected by menstrual taboos and negative attitudes. The majority of women will at some stage or other suffer from one of the menstrual sumptoms of pain, backache, migraine, flooding, scant menses or premenstrual tension and find themselves at the mercy of unsympathetic male doctors who tell us that it is "all in the mind" and offer to tranquilise women out of existence. Then there is the doctor who wants to "end all your problems in one go" and puts pressure on us to have a hysterectomy. Research done in Oxford has shown that 75% of hysterectomies performed in this country are unnecessary from the medical point of view and often women feel lethargic and depressed following this operation, especially if done prior to the menopause.

The menopause is the opposite end of the spectrum and is equally subject to negative attitudes and punitive social forces as puberty. Wendy Cooper in "No Change" has documented the attitudes of the male medical profession to providing realistic help for women during the menopause. If we question why the female menopause is treated almost at the level of a music hall joke, we will realise that patriarchal society is telling us that we are finished that when we can no longer reproduce we are not useful members of patriarchal society.

Women's needs

Anthropologically there is no known society which encourages coitus during the menses, and a great many contemporary men are still affected by the menstrual blood taboo in sexual intercourse. Until the second decade of this

century, male medical mytholgy decreed that the female ovulated during the menses and taboos at this time were thought to be a form of contraception. Now that this idea of contamination by the menses be comes even more identifyable, as the reason for avoidance.

"I would like to have intercourse during my periods, but my husband avoids me like the plague. I feel that it is the only time which is reasonably safe as I can't take the Pill now for health reasons. I also need sexual attention and affection at that time to make me feel loved and wanted as I tend to think that I am very unattractive then and this makes me feel insecure

"My husband's avoidance is double edged because he very much connects affectionate behaviour with sex, so no sex, no love play - then I feel doubly rejected.

"He can't stand the thought of blood on his penis or of stains on the bedclothes. He had the same attitude towards intercourse in pregnancy as if somehow he would be'contaminated' by the pregnancy."(26 year-old woman with one child.)

Celebrating together

But menstruation is much more than menstrual blood, It is also to do with ovulation and fertility, with the production of female hormones of oestrogen and progesterone, and with the female cycles which affect not only sexuality but the whole of women's lives. There is evidence that when women organise society, these cycles are taken into account. Before the patriarchal takeover, and the change over to Solar time, matriarchal communities were governed by the triple moon goddess and organised according to the lunar month of twenty nine days is about the same length as the average female menstrual cycle.

Communal sexual rites and orgiastic festivals were held, not only to encourage the growth of crops, but to provide maximum opportunity for erotic pleasure. Such festivals were often held at full moon. The main characteristics of these feasts were that women controlled them and that they were held cyclically. Some of the festivals began with homosexual rites and ended in coitus with men. Others were essintially lesbian in character, such as the rite of the worship of Bona Dea in Italy, related to the important Isis cult, or the rites of the Orphic mysteries. Female initiation rites and group sexual activities were only suppressed well after the patriarchal takeover, by rigorous and often brutal suppression of the goddess religions and the cults associated with them.

Pat Whiting

Moon Phases

I am the barren emblem
the dark aspect of the night.
Open your eyes in darkness,
there is only the smell of cold earth.

Then, as an echo, my grey, dry, desrt vastness
yearns, entombing me in a hanging edifice of waiting.
I am not to be seen, and sharply, crazed to be alone,
I dare you to approach; and you think that I am mad.

I am the thin wafer crystal
light of hallowed water cool
on your tongue as parched
you gulp from the falling stream.

Moving as a flash of sunlight through nodding leaves,
if you hear the laughter of joy, quicken as on the edge
of shadow, or eye's corner and you try to catch the mood,
don't wait for, I am the beginning ever.

I am the calm rock pool
half-shadowed, silent, still,
and weeds barely waver
as the eddy never touched me.

It didn't matter to me that time passed, by hour,
beat on beaten path of the time-keeper's track, pointless
when I know that same moment comes again so soon:
I am nothing now or I am all in every time.

I am the pale whole
so close, so far, featureless;
you all can see me plainly,
simply more complex.

The doorway is well lit and opened wide,
nothing daunts, not a moments wonder
so clear, so strong, the thought, the smile,
my light encircles all and you and I are shining.

I am the picture dream
you never knew the question
for, the thought you left
unheard, all asking dead.

So vague and fluctuating now, I let
strong moments pass, colours die and fade,
and I am wondering if this misted memory of others
floating, will gel the energy I once knew.

Mary Coghill.

BOOK LIST.

The Eumenides	Aeschylus: trans. Gilbert Murray Allen & Unwin.
The Mothers	Robert Briffault. Allen & Unwin
No Change	Wendy Cooper. Pathfinder Press.
The Menstrual Cycle	Katherine Dalton. Pelican.
Myths dreams & Mysteries	Mircea Eliade. Fontana/Collins.
Folk Lore in the Old Testament	J.G. Frazer. MacMillan.
The Golden Bough	J.G. Frazer. Abridged ed. Paperback MacMillan.
Totem & Taboo	S. Freud. Penguin.
The First Sex	E. Gould Davis. Putnam/Dent/ Penguin.
Hebrew Myths	Robert Graves & Ralph Patai. Cassall
Woman's Mysteries	M. Esther Harding. Rider.
The Sociology of Sex	Fernando Henriques. Panther.
Golden Notebook	Doris Lessing. (Free Woman-2 The Blue Notebook)
Not in God's Image	ed. Julia O'Faolain & L. Martines. Fontana/Collins.
Womens Evolution	Evelyn Reed Pathfinder Inc.
The Sexual Behaviour of Young People	Micheal Schofield. Pelican.

MOTHER GODDESS WITH SON.
FROM AN ARKADIAN BASALT SEAL.

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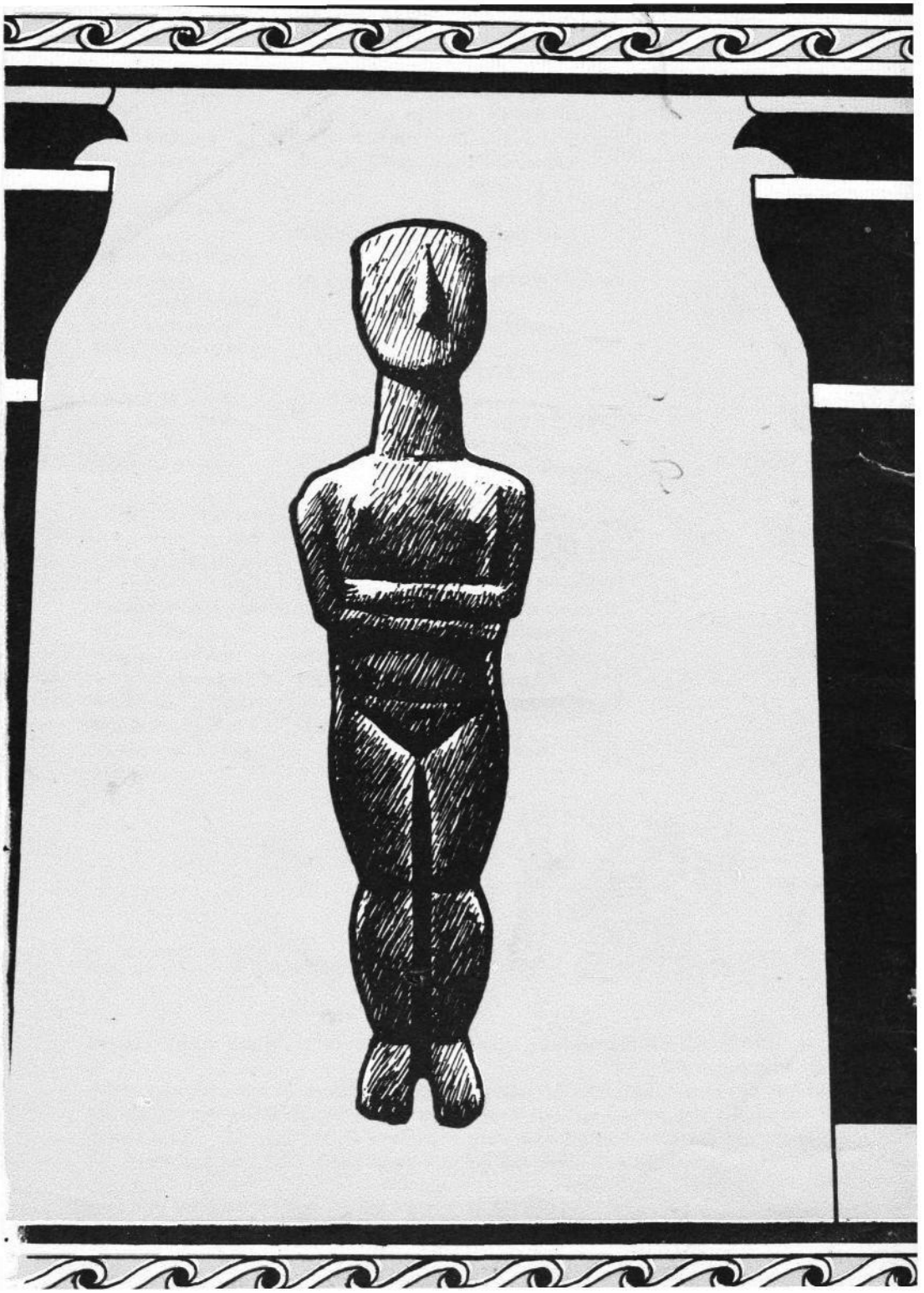
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